

Introduction

Chiara Croci and Vladimir Ivanovici

**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/edl/1134>

DOI: 10.4000/edl.1134

ISSN: 2296-5084

Publisher

Université de Lausanne

Printed version

Date of publication: 15 May 2018

Number of pages: 7-16

ISBN: 978-2-940331-68-0

ISSN: 0014-2026

Electronic reference

Chiara Croci and Vladimir Ivanovici, « Introduction », *Études de lettres* [Online], 2 | 2018, Online since 15 May 2018, connection on 12 December 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/edl/1134> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/edl.1134>

This text was automatically generated on 12 December 2020.

© Études de lettres

Introduction

Chiara Croci and Vladimir Ivanovici

- 1 Domed spaces built by societies around the Mediterranean represent a fascinating category of structures. With a particular capacity to circumscribe a place in space, and a visionary dimension afforded by the cosmic symbolism of the dome, these buildings were central to both sacred topographies and mise-en-scènes designed for self-promotion. In Graeco-Roman antiquity, tombs of mythic Greek heroes and temples of a Roman cult of fire going back to pre-history were marked with centralised domed structures. Towards the turn of the millennium they became the prerogative of monarchs who imagined themselves as semidivine, a liminal status they expressed through their monumental domed mausolea. Adopted from the East, the monumental mausoleum was the first unequivocal statement of self-divinisation used by Roman rulers: Augustus (27BCE-14CE) built his mausoleum inside the *pomerium*, on the Campus Martius. During the late antique period, the space went through a process of “popularisation” while retaining its aulic dimension. Mausolea, *memoria*, *martyria*, baptisteries, imperial churches, and palatine chapels used the plan in various permutations. The sturdiness of the centralised design, its association with meaningful places whose worship was never discontinued, and the usually high prestige of the commissions, which assured the quality of the building and decoration, contributed to the survival of these structures in an important number. As with the archaic *tholoi* of *hérôa*, the late antique mausoleum and the buildings it influenced revolved essentially around an individual, whether deceased or alive. The visionary potential of the space was maintained and even enhanced in the period. The recurrence of the two symbolic characteristics, individual commemoration and visionary experience, in late antique and early Medieval domed spaces, as well as their common source in the imperial mausoleum renders them a coherent category, addressed as such for the first time in the present volume.
- 2 The decorative solutions imagined for domes represent a *fil rouge* which allows us to trace both the dissemination pattern of this structure, from imperial mausolea to a diversified yet related category of experiences, and the processes symbolised by the popularisation of the typology. The dome’s use in some of the most consequential phenomena of the period — the divinity of emperors, the Christian cult of martyrs and

relics, the growing belief in the afterlife, the Christianising of Roman society, the emergence of a Christian theory of rulership — recommend the domed building as privileged medium for the analysis of the changes that marked the passing from antiquity to the Middle Ages. In particular, the traceable manner in which the plan and decoration of these spaces disseminated from aulic to ever more popular contexts, casts light on important dynamics at work in the field of artistic production in the period. Concurrently, the visionary dimension of the experience afforded by the spaces through the decoration documents the change in the *Weltanschauung* particular to Late Antiquity. Given their anthropological dimension, and their capacity to place one at the centre of a visionary experience, domed spaces were a privileged element in a process Peter Brown considered Christianity's most challenging endeavour and most impressive success in the period: the Christianisation of the *mundus*, the underlying structure of the world. This, the Irish scholar argued, required a “slow, hard labor on the imagination of an entire society, in order to produce (through constant dialogue and confrontation with non-Christians) a clearly focused Christian thought-world. In this immense imaginative adventure, churches great and small represented fragile islands of Christian order.”¹ Analysis of their decorative programmes thus casts light on the new horizon late antique society in general and Christianity in particular proposed in the period. It becomes obvious from the individual contributions, which follow the dissemination of the domed structure in chronological progression from the fourth to the beginning of the ninth century, that the interior of domed buildings documents the anthropological developments of the period. The hope for immortality and divinity expressed in imperial mausolea through symbolic depictions on the cosmic space of the dome not only extends to the rest of late antique society but it is also enhanced. As the visual effects that were symbolic in imperial mausolea became artifices of inclusion in cultic spaces, the decoration of domed spaces placed the onlooker inside the vision rather than referencing it. In tracing the decorative solutions we thus find traces of how humanity conversed with the divine, an ever-changing experience in this most exciting historic period.

- 3 The complex symbolism behind centralised spaces and the decoration they afforded hindered for the most part the proposal of synthetic studies on the topic. Karl Lehmann attempted an overall reading of the iconography of domes from Roman times to the Christian Middle Ages, and underlined the cosmic symbolism of the space.² His erudite yet concise study stimulated both emulators and critiques, stirring further research on the subject.³ Thus, E. Baldwin Smith and Louis Hauteœur sought to cast light on the origin and meaning of centralised structures in monographic studies.⁴ In the past fifteen years, a number of monographic studies on the most important extant case studies expanded our understanding of the individual buildings, and invited a new synthetic reading.⁵ The present volume responds to this invitation.
- 4 Rather than a monograph which would have had the advantage of coherence but would have addressed the topic from an unavoidably limited perspective, we opted for an anthology. With their diverse backgrounds (art history, architectural history, archaeology, ritual studies), the authors cast light on the spaces from a variety of points of view. At the intersection of these diverse perspectives the symbolism of the domed building emerges with its myriad complexity and connotations. The contributions follow the dissemination of the domed structure in chronological sequence. In so doing, they address concerns regarding the buildings' design, structure, decoration, and iconography. The collective effort elucidates fundamental aspects

regarding the dynamic behind the structural and decorative choices, the iconographic solutions and their meaning, as well as the relationship between the spaces, their decoration, the commissioner, and the function of the spaces.

- 5 The first essay, by Matteo Braconi, opens the discussion with a complex approach that uses the evolution of decorative patterns to propose a dynamic of dissemination for domed structures in Late Antiquity. Focusing on funerary monuments, it paves the way for subsequent texts. Braconi investigates the adoption and adaptation of imperial motifs, casting light on the interchange between imperial and private commissions. In touching on essential phenomena such as the transformation of imperial art upon its adoption by Christianity, the text opens wide topics on the dynamic between Roman and Christian, imperial and private, mausolea and other structures. Elisabetta Neri's contribution deepens the considerations proposed by Braconi by focusing on a particular case study, the church of San Lorenzo in Milan. Central to the process of transitioning from imperial to Christian commission, the Milanese church is still one of the major mysteries of scholarship on fourth-century Christian architecture. Neri proposes the cross-study of written testimonies and archaeometric analysis as a means to solve long-standing art historical and archaeological questions. The San Giovanni in Fonte Baptistery in Naples, the focus of Chiara Croci's text, pertains to this intermediary phase as its decorative pattern draws heavily on previous, imperial models. Simultaneously, the building opens the discussion on a new setting for domed spaces, the baptismal experience, to which an important part of the volume is dedicated in virtue of the baptistery functioning as liminal space reworking a more general Roman worldview into a Christian one. Seeking to identify the narrative solutions thought by the designers of the decorative programme, Croci discusses the various options developed for radial compositions. How the tension between vision and narration is solved in radial compositions, and how the content related to the function of the space are central questions to which Croci offers convincing answers which complete the view proposed by Braconi and prepare the more detailed analysis of the function and effect of these spaces made by Ivanovici and Foletti. The complex solution ascertainable in Naples is subsequently abandoned in favour of simpler, more direct compositions. Alžběta Filipová focuses on the first phase of this process of semantic simplification in her analysis of the decoration of the baptisteries in Albenga and Milan. Drawing on her studies on Ambrose of Milan's political use of relics, Filipová proposes a conceptual and iconographic coherence between the two centres and seeks to answer the standing question of the decoration of the ambrosian baptistery in Milan. The emulative dynamic that emerged as central in Braconi's text resurfaces in a new, politically tinted expression which draws attention to the complexity of the phenomena behind the dissemination and decoration of these highly symbolic spaces.
- 6 Vladimir Ivanovici and Ivan Foletti focus on the visionary effect and its meaning from different yet congruent perspectives. Thus, Ivanovici considers the role and meaning of the decoration of fifth-century baptisteries, drawing attention to their perception being shaped by the nocturnal setting of the ritual. The iconography and the role of light testifies to the betwixt and between character of the building and its audience as it represents a Christianised version of a common initiatory experience. The effect of the visual experience touched upon by Ivanovici becomes the main focus of Foletti, who stresses the change in worldview discernible through differences in the manner of representation of visions. Foletti focuses on the San Vittore in Ciel d'Oro Milanese chapel whose decoration, dated towards the end of the sixth century, he reads as a

rupture that announces the beginning of a new, Medieval perception of holy space. The capacity of centralised, domed spaces to offer visionary experiences whose effect was enhanced by the ever-more inclusive decorative programmes — an aspect underlined from various perspectives by Braconi, Ivanovici, and Foletti — casts light on the changing dynamic between human and divine, and evolving notion of sacred space in late antiquity.

- 7 Mark Johnson's text leads us outside the baptismal sphere, and into the imperial commission of Christian cultic buildings at the dawn of Byzantium. His analysis makes a fundamental addition to our understanding of the design of churches with central plan by identifying the principles underlying the process. Dependency on ratios inherited from the Roman world and the eventual break away from them not only cast light on the relationship between Byzantine and Roman architecture, but serve as instrument to reconsider the dynamic between architecture in the eastern and western provinces. Johnson can thus testify to the direct relationship between the churches of San Vitale in Ravenna and Ss. Sergius and Bacchus in Constantinople, a thesis that had been recently contested, and gives us the instruments to reconsider cultic architecture at the beginning of the Middle Ages. Simone Piazza's text concludes the collective effort with an analysis of a monument for long considered a copy of San Vitale in Ravenna, Charles the Great's Palatine Chapel in Aachen. The long and thorny tradition regarding the initial decorative programme is synthesised by Piazza, who proposes a new solution for the decoration of the central clipeus which places the building in closer relationship with late antique precedents than so-far believed, and thus draws attention to the weight of the late antique heritage on early Medieval decoration.
- 8 The coherence of the volume despite the various backgrounds of the authors testifies to domed spaces functioning as nexus of a number of essential phenomena. The relevance of these buildings in which social, cosmological, anthropological, and art historical processes overlap in continuous change emerges clearly from the contributions. In particular, the texts reveal the dynamic at work in the elaboration of decorative compositions and their complex, manifold effect on onlookers. Privileged space in which the passing from antiquity to the Middle Ages was not only reflected but enacted, the late antique and early Medieval domed structure holds a key to questions regarding cosmology, anthropology, and aesthetic taste. Those detailed in the pages of the present volume beg for an extended effort that would include other relevant structures from around the Mediterranean which promise to complete the fascinating image we have barely sketched. Concerns related to assuring conceptual coherence, as well as limitations of space imposed by the publication format influenced the number and the approach of the contributions. The authors focused on specific aspects, which they extracted out of otherwise wider settings. The compromise, nevertheless, imposed a zooming out that created an image with clearly delineated margins, allowing us to trace the dynamics underlying the building, decoration, and use of these buildings. In light of the important individual conclusions but especially of the general view offered by them together further, more detailed and inclusive studies on the topic appear necessary. We thus propose the present volume as an incentive and invitation to reconsider the possibilities offered by interdisciplinary research and by domes spaces in the period.
- 9 We would like to thank those who made the present project possible, the speakers-turned-authors who responded to our invitation, as well as the discussants and

reviewers. A special thanks is due in particular to Nicolas Bock, who supported the idea of the workshop that he inserted as part of the CUSO programme for the 29th of May 2017, thus giving way to the volume. A great thank you is due also to the team of the *Études des lettres* journal, who offered us the opportunity to publish the acts and whose editorial work was impeccable. Finally, we would like to thank Élodie Dupas, Adrien Palladino, and Morgan Ng who helped us render the French and English texts more readable.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ARBEITER, Achim, KOROL, Dieter (Hrsg.), *Der Kuppelbau von Centcelles. Neue Forschungen zu einem enigmatischen Denkmal von Weltrang*, Tübingen, Wasmuth, 2015.
- BALDWIN SMITH, Earl, *The dome : a study in the history of ideas*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1950.
- BROWN, Peter, “ Late Antiquity : anomaly and order between a pagan and a christian world ”, in *Transition to Christianity : Art of Late Antiquity, 3rd-7th Century AD*, ed. by Anastasia Lazaridou, New York, Alexander S. Onassis Foundation, 2011, p. 21-25.
- CROCI, Chiara, *Una « questione campana ». La prima arte monumentale cristiana tra Napoli, Nola e Capua (secc. IV-VI)*, Roma, Viella, 2017.
- FERRI, Giovanna, *I mosaici del battistero di San Giovanni in Fonte a Napoli*, Todi, Tau editrice, 2013.
- HAUTECEUR, Louis, *Mystique et architecture. Symbolisme du cercle et de la coupole*, Paris, Picard, 1954.
- IVANOVICI, Vladimir, *Manipulating theophany. Light and ritual in north Adriatic architecture (ca. 400-ca. 800)*, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 2016.
- LEHMANN, Karl, “ The dome of Heaven ”, *Art Bulletin*, 27 (1945), p. 1-27.
- MATHEWS, Thomas F., “ Cracks in Lehmann’s ‘ Dome of Heaven ’ ”, *Source : notes on the History of Art*, 1/3 (1982), p. 12-16.
- MUSCOLINO, Cetty, RANALDI, Antonella, TEDESCHI, Claudia (edd.), *Il Battistero Neoniano : uno sguardo attraverso il restauro*, Ravenna, Longo, 2011.
- PENTCHEVA, Bissera, *Hagia Sophia : sound, space, and spirit in Byzantium*, University Park, Pennsylvania, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017.
- RASCH, Jürgen J., ARBEITER, Achim, *Das Mausoleum der Constantina in Rom*, Mainz am Rhein, Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2007.
- SCHIBILLE, Nadine, *Hagia Sophia and the Byzantine aesthetic experience*, Burlington, Ashgate, 2014.
- SENEKOVIC, Darko, *Die Kirchen der Stadt Rom im Mittelalter 1050-1300, 2.2. San Giovanni in Laterano*, Stuttgart, Steiner, 2008.
- SOPER, Alexander Coburn, “ The ‘ Dome of Heaven ’ in Asia ”, *Art Bulletin*, 29 (1947), p. 225-248.

NOTES

1. P. Brown, “ Late Antiquity ”, p. 25.
 2. K. Lehmann, “ The Dome of Heaven ”.
 3. A. C. Soper, “ The ‘Dome of Heaven’ in Asia ”, *Art Bulletin* 29 (1947) 225-248 expanded Lehmann’s celestial thesis to buildings in Asia. Lehmann’s reading of Christian dome decoration as celestial was contested by Thomas F. Mathews, “ Cracks in Lehmann’s ‘ Dome of Heaven ’ ”.
 4. E. Baldwin Smith, *The Dome* ; L. Hauteœur, *Mystique et architecture*.
 5. J. J. Rasch, A. Arbeiter, *Das Mausoleum der Constantina in Rom* ; D. Senekovic, *Die Kirchen der Stadt Rom im Mittelalter 1050-1300* ; C. Muscolino, A. Ranaldi, C. Tedeschi (edd.), *Il Battistero Neoniano* ; A. Arbeiter, D. Karol (Hrsg.), *Der Kuppelbau von Centcelles* ; V. Ivanovici, *Manipulating theophany* ; G. Ferri, *I mosaici del battistero di San Giovanni in Fonte a Napoli* ; Ch. Croci, *Una « questione campana »* ; N. Schibille, *Hagia Sophia and the Byzantine aesthetic experience* ; B. Pentcheva, *Hagia Sophia*.
-

AUTHORS

CHIARA CROCI

Université de Lausanne

VLADIMIR IVANOVICI

Masaryk University Brno et Università della Svizzera Italiana